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CIA Boosting Covert Efforts Against Gadhafi

Plan Approved by Reagan Calls for Rise in Support For Libyan Leader's Foes

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WASHINGTON — The Central Intelligence Agency is intensifying covert efforts to unseat Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi.

A plan approved last month by President Reagan calls for the CIA to increase support for Col. Gadhafi's opponents, both inside Libya and among Libyan exiles. Under the plan, the CIA also will promote reports in the Middle East of growing opposition to Mr. Gadhafi, and will recruit new agents to report on his activities and to work against him, administration sources said.

Although a mix of cunning, charisma, and brutality has kept Mr. Gadhafi in power for 17 years, U.S. intelligence analysts believe the Libyan leader's grip now is slipping. But U.S. and Western European diplomats and intelligence analysts conceded that despite growing political, economic, and even military unrest in Libya, there is no reason to believe that Mr. Gadhafi's demise is imminent. And in recent weeks Mr. Gadhafi has moved to reassert himself as Libya's leader.

"He's in trouble, but it is too early to write him off," said a knowledgeable diplomat in Western Europe.

Overt Pressures

U.S. sources said the CIA's covert activities are meant to capitalize on the overt pressure imposed on Libya by Western economic sanctions and by almost continuous U.S. military activity off the Libyan coast.

U.S. officials hope that fear of another U.S. bombing of Libya, combined with CIA attempts to organize political opposition within the country, will prompt Mr. Gadhafi to again drop from public view to his desert hideaways, such as he did after the April U.S. bombing raid. CIA analysts believe Mr. Gadhafi is in some respects a traditional Arab street politician, whose power rests partly on his charisma and his stirring oratory, so the U.S. strategy is to prevent him from using those tools.

U.S. strategy also aims to drive a wedge between Mr. Gadhafi and the Libyan military. The Reagan administration's decision last April to bomb targets connected to the Libyan leader's inner circle and his support for terrorism—rather than hitting the regular Libyan military—was meant partly to heighten tensions between the dictator and the military.

In an effort similarly designed to foster disenchantment among Libyan military people with Mr. Gadhafi's foreign adventures, the administration is encouraging France to attack Libyan forces in Chad, and offering U.S. logistical assistance in the effort. U.S. and French sources said the desertion rate among the Libyans sent to fight in Chad already is high.

Losing Touch With Military

Analysts at the CIA, the Pentagon, the State Department, and the White House all believe that Mr. Gadhafi is losing touch with the military, even with many of the officers who helped him seize power in 1969.

According to U.S. intelligence sources, the Libyan leader constantly shuffles commanders, has withheld ammunition from some army units, and has assigned more than 1,000 fanatical young revolutionary guardsmen to the military—all in an attempt to prevent any opposition to his rule from taking root.

The sources said Col. Gadhafi also has assigned a number of political operatives to the military and has set up special command posts in Tripoli's al-Azizia barracks and at an army barracks in Benghazi—both targets of last April's bombing raid—to keep tabs on the military.

Last Nov. 23, U.S. intelligence officials believe, Mr. Gadhafi ordered the murder of the third-highest-ranking officer in the military, Col. Hassan Ishkal, who also commanded the base in Sirte, Mr. Gadhafi's hometown. U.S. officials say they believe Col. Ishkal was shot, probably by revolutionary guardsmen, while on his way to a meeting with Mr. Gadhafi to complain about the mistreatment of the military.

CIA Makes Progress

U.S. officials said the CIA has made some progress against Mr. Gadhafi lately. Agents have succeeded in meeting outside Libya with potential resistance leaders from inside the country. But U.S. officials admitted that organizing resistance to Col. Gadhafi is difficult.

"He's still in control," said one senior official. "Even though he's isolated, he can still manipulate the intelligence services and the revolutionary guards."

The CIA's efforts to destabilize Mr. Gadhafi, which have been under way since 1981, also have been hampered by the absence of an attractive alternative to the Libyan leader. "No matter how nutty he gets, there is no obvious replacement around," said one administration official. "There is no viable leader or organized group to pull it off," conceded a senior U.S. official.

U.S. officials acknowledged that the more than 10 anti-Gadhafi exile groups often squabble with one another, and counterrevolutionary activity within Libya remains splintered. U.S. officials said the CIA is trying to unify at least some of the opposition groups, the same way it has tried to unite anti-Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua.

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